Panel: “America As a Work in Progress”

Alexander Allison

Title: The NAACP and the Dyer Bill: A Campaign to End Lynchings
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Alexander Allison enrolled at IPFW in the fall of 2009. Initially interested in comparative literature, Alex quickly realized that his academic interests were better suited for the fields of history and Spanish. Since then, Alex has enjoyed studying a diverse group of historical topics and has made significant strides towards becoming fluent in Spanish. In 2010, Alex studied abroad in Salamanca, Spain. More recently, he spent a semester in Valparaíso, Chile where he studied at the Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. In his free time he enjoys reading, and is particularly fond of authors Gabriel García Márquez and Chinua Achebe. Together with Dr. Richard Weiner, Alex is co-authoring an article on Immanuel Wallenstein and his World-System theory for publication in OUP’s forthcoming Encyclopedia of World Poverty. In January of 2015, Alex will move to Barcelona, Spain where he intends to both improve his Spanish and celebrate his youth.

Abstract

Few aspects of American history are as difficult to confront as the phenomenon of lynchings that occurred throughout the United States from the 1880s to the middle of the twentieth century. Generally referred to as “America’s shame,” the practice of lynching and the culture associated with it has often been described as the last skeleton in America’s closet, and not surprisingly it has captured the interest of multiple generations of scholars. Countless works on the subject have been published, and while almost every aspect of America lynchings has been thoroughly explored by scholars interested in the subject one particular feature has received astonishingly little attention: the role that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Persons (NAACP) played in bringing the brutal practice to an end. Specifically, few scholars have explored in detail the effort that the NAACP put forth in order to secure the passage of the Dyer Bill, a piece of federal legislation that was designed to enable the federal government to effectively combat the practice of lynching. This is not only surprising considering that the campaign the NAACP waged in support of the Dyer Bill was the first national movement organized to confront the horrors of lynching, but also because the energy that the NAACP exerted in order to obtain congressional approval of the bill far exceeded the efforts put forth by Leonidas C. Dyer, the bill’s author and sponsor, and his fellow republican congressman. Furthermore, the NAACP’s campaign in support of the Dyer Bill would later serve as a model for all other NAACP anti-lynching movements, most notably the NAACP campaign in support of the Costigan-Wagner Bill.

The goal of my research is to study the tactics that the NAACP devised in order to promote support for the Dyer Bill amongst both Congress and the American public. Using the NAACP’s administrative records, annual reports, and other materials published by the organization, I intend to demonstrate that the NAACP believed that the best way to secure the passage of federal anti-lynching legislation was by collecting and organizing reliable information on
lynnings in order to demonstrate the barbaric nature of the practice, as well as to dispel the myth that lynchings were a tool used to punish and prevent sexual interaction between black men and white women. Specifically, I will focus on the NAACP’s investigations into lynchings and the publication of the groundbreaking work Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States in addition to other anti-lynching literature, the legal support the organization enlisted in order to demonstrate the constitutionality of the bill, James Weldon Johnson’s lobbying campaign, the NAACP’s attempts to organize political pressure on republican congressman who abandoned the bill, and finally the massive fundraising campaign the NAACP undertook in order to fund their anti-lynching efforts. Despite that the Dyer Bill was ultimately killed in the Senate by a Democratic filibuster, I believe that by thoroughly examining the campaign the NAACP organized on behalf of the Dyer Bill it will become evident that the NAACP was in large part responsible for opening the nation’s eyes to the horrors of lynching.

**Bibliographical Note**

The overwhelming majority of Alex’s research is based off of the NAACP’s annual reports and administrative files. Further evidence was drawn from congressional records and articles published by the *New York Times*. The secondary sources which were consulted relate to both the history of the NAACP and the practice and culture of lynching in the United States.